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ABSTRACT

The possibility that the general public does not support women being school administrators is explored by reviewing the results of earlier studies and reporting the results of a survey of adults in Oregon. The vast majority of a sample of 824 adults approve of women being school administrators. The younger and higher status respondents are more likely to be supportive, as are the respondents who have children in school or have known a woman administrator. Home owners are slightly less supportive, although a majority of them still favor women in administration. There are no differences in the support of people with different political affiliations or likelihood to vote. The respondents are more likely to approve of women being elementary principals than their being secondary principals or school superintendents. It is suggested that school officials, members of school boards, and school administrators have overestimated the amount of public resistence to women assuming school administration posts and that the public in both Oregon and other states is indeed ready to approve women entering school administration. (Author/MLF)

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Public Prejudice Against Women School Administrators:

Fact or Fiction?

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PUBLIC PREJUDICE AGAINST WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS: FACT OR FICTION?

While a majority of the professionals in education are women, the various occupational areas within education are sharply segregated by sex. Two-thirds of all teachers in the United States are women, yet only 19.6% of the elementary school principals, 1.4%of the secondary school principals, and 0.1% of the superintendents in the country are women (Fischel and Pottker, 1974:6). This sex differential has persisted at least since the late nineteenth century (Tyack, 1974:61).

One possible reason for this discrepant sex ratio is that the general public does not support women being school administrators. This paper explores that possibility by reviewing the results of earlier studies and reporting the results of a survey of adults in a western state in 1977.

Why Aren't Women School Administrators?

Suzanne Estler (1975) has reviewed evidence that relates to women's underrepresentation in school administration. She concluded that there was no evidence that men were selected for administrative posts because they were more competent or qualified than women candidates. Instead, she suggested that women may not aspire to administrative jobs as often as men because they see administration as "men's place" in society. This is reinforced by actual discrimination against women in the job market. Women educators are less often encouraged to pursue administrative careers and are less often assigned responsibilities that will lead to administrative jobs than are men educators.

Some Think that "The Public Won't Stand for It"

In 1975 Patricia Schmuck interviewed school administrators around the state of Oregon and asked them why they thought more women had not entered administration. Their reasons support Estler's conclusion that hiring officials discriminate in favor of men over women.

One common reason they gave for not hiring women was that the public did not want women to be administrators. For instance, two male administrators said,

> "In some of our schools the parents might object to a female principal."
>
> and
>
> "The public sees the principal as the center for discipline. They don't see women as disciplinarians."

A woman school principal reported,

> "When I was assigned, people were upset. People literally came in to look at me. A first grader who lived next door would come over and say, 'A woman principal, I can't believe it.'"

School Officials Do Not Support Women Administrators

Other studies have found that teachers, school administrators, and members of school boards do not support women in school administration. Fishel and Pottker (1975) summarized the results of these studies. Both male and female teachers prefer to work with male administrators (Matheny, 1973; Neidig, 1973; NEA, 1975; Linton, 1974; all cited by Fishel and Pottker, 1975:113). However, teachers who have worked with female administrators express much more favorable attitudes toward them (Barter, 1959; Warwick,

1967; NEA, 1973; all cited by Fishel and Pottker, 1975:113; Grambs, 1976). Women teachers are less likely than men to be encouraged by supervisors to enter administration (Jenkins, 1966; Warwick, 1967; Taylor, 1971; Matheny, 1973), and those who hire administrators, including superintendents and school board members are generally opposed to appointing women (Barter, 1959; Warwick, 1967; Cobbley, 1970; Taylor, 1971; Matheny, 1973; LaBarthhe, 1973; Longstretch, 1973; Neidig, 1975; all cited by Fischel and Pottker, 1975:113-114).

Actual Attitudes of the "Public"

Apparently only one study that has examined the views of the public at large exists. A Gallup poll commissioned by Phi Delta Kappan in 1975 asked a representative sample of adults around the nation this question: "The law may require hiring as many women school principals as men. Which would you personally prefer for this job--a man or a woman?" Thirty-nine percent of the respondents said they would prefer a man as principal, 7% preferred a woman, 52% said that it made no difference, and 2% said they didn't know or gave no answer (Gallup, 1975:235).

To summarize, it appears that the majority of school officials, those who actually make decisions about hiring women administrators, prefer not to hire women. They believe that public opinion supports their actions. In contrast, the Gallup poll results suggest that the majority of citizens have no preference for a man or a woman as a school administrator. Unfortunately, the Gallup poll question had two drawbacks. First, the respondents were simply asked to choose between an administrator of one sex or the other and

it is impossible to ascertain their degree of support for women administrators. Second, the wording of the question, which implied that the changes would be forced upon the public, could have biased the results.

Methods Used in This Study

Because of the limitations of this earlier work, the Sex Equity in Educational Leadership Project at the University of Oregon decided to assess public attitudes toward women in school administration. The public opinion polling firm of Bardsley and Haslacher was commissioned to do a survey of attitudes toward women in school administration throughout the state of Oregon. The firm used a multi-stage probablity sampling procedure that gave each adult in the state an equal chance of being selected. Eight hundred twenty four Oregon adults were personally interviewed within one week in January, 1977. Data on standard demographic variables such as age, sex and income were collected, and the respondents were also asked the following questions relating to women administrators.

1. "Different people have different reactions to women in higher levels of public school administration. For example, how would you feel about having a woman as principal of an elementary school in your local area." (The respondents were then handed a card.) "On this scale are 10 numbers, running from plus five, meaning you would strongly approve, all the way down to minus five, meaning you would strongly disapprove. Just select the one number that best represents how you feel about having a woman as an elementary school principal in your area."

"Now, using the same scale, how would you feel about having a woman as a high school principal in your area?"

"And, finally, how would you feel about having a woman as a school district superintendent in your area?"

The respondents were then asked:

2. "Within the past ten years, have you happened to know or had any contact with women school administrators?"

and

3. "Some people visit public schools fairly often, while others don't have the opportunity or reason. Not counting elections, about how many times, if any, have you visited a public school or attended school activities in the past year or so?"

In these questions the respondents were not forced to choose between a male or a female in an administrative position, but were simply asked how they would feel about a woman assuming the job. In contrast to earlier studies, we differentiated the various levels of administration, and we asked questions that allowed us to assess the impact of knowing a woman administrator on the public's attitudes and whether or not the people who most often visit schools tend to support the idea of women being administrators.

Results

A Large Majority Support Women Administrators

The general results are given in Table 1. This table indicates that the vast majority of the adults in Oregon would support women in administrative positions. The amount of support is even greater than Gallup (1975)

reported. This support is strongest for women in elementary school principalships. The greater support in this area could be expected, since only 50 years ago more women than men were elementary principals (Fishel and Pottker, 1975:110; Johnson, 1971). Yet, 84% of the sample also approved of a woman being a high school principal and 86% approved of a woman being a school superintendent.

The remaining tables show the attitudes of various subgroups. Men are slightly more likely than women to approve of women entering the posts (see Table 2). This difference is especially marked with the question regarding the high school principalship. This sex difference, with men giving more liberal responses, is commonly found in surveys of the general population.

Young People Support Women Administrators More

Younger people are more supportive of women administrators than older people (see Table 3). The gap between attitudes of the youngest and oldest groups is smallest with the question regarding elementary school principals. This result could be expected since many of these older citizens likely attended an elementary school that had a woman principal.

There was also a slight, but consistent, association between reported attitudes and various measures of social status. People with annual incomes over $15,000, who were in professional or managerial occupations, or who had attended college were more supportive of women administrators. People with annual incomes less than $15,000, who were in agricultural occupations, or who had less than a high school education were less supportive. This tendency for people of higher status to express more liberal attitudes is generally found in surveys of the total population.

Voters Support Women Administrators

In Oregon, the monetary support for school districts largely comes from property taxes assessed of land owners. Each year, the voters must pass a school tax levy if the schools are to operate. While home owners are much less likely than renters to approve of women administrators (see Table 4), there are no significant differences in support from those in different political parties or from people who are more or less likely to vote in an election.

Parents Support Women Administrators

Adults with children attending public schools in Oregon are more likely to support women being senior high principals or superintendents than are people who have no children in school. This difference did not appear with the question regarding elementary principals, largely because those without children are more supportive (see Table 5). This likely reflects the greater support for women elementary principals found among older residents.

While there is a slight tendency for people who have visited a school in the last year to be more supportive, this difference is so small that it could have occurred by chance.

Rural Residents Are Less Supportive

As do many states, Oregon has several distinguishable geographic regions. The only major metropolitan area is the three-county area around Portland. The Willamette Valley area is an industrial and mixed-farming area. It is

the only other heavily populated area of the state. The coastal, eastern, and southern portions of the state are more sparsely populated and are generally considered to be more politically conservative than the Willamette Valley and Portland areas. Yet, even within all of these areas, a majority of the respondents support women in school administration posts. The least amount of disapproval comes from the coastal region, but the greatest proportion of strong support comes from the Willamette Valley and metropolitan areas. The least support is found in the eastern and southern regions of the state (see Table 6).

As is apparent from Table 7, people who have known a woman administrator are more likely to approve of women being in administrative posts. Yet, residents in the more rural coastal, eastern, and southern areas of the state are more likely than their urban neighbors in other regions to have never met a woman school administrator. While 34% of the residents of the Willamette Valley and 30% of the Portland area residents in the sample have known a woman administrator, only 21% of the residents in the more rural areas report such acquaintance. Part of the lack of support in the more rural regions may occur then because there are so few women administrators in these areas.

To examine the possibility that it is their exposure to women administrators rather than their region of residence that can account for the lower support of rural residents, the responsesof people in each region who have known women administrators and those who have not were tabulated separately (see Table 8). Although there is some tendency for the difference between responses of residents in each region to be smaller when only those who have

known women administrators are compared, the regional differences remain. In other words, the impact of knowing a woman administrator does not totally override the influence of the region in which a person lives. In fact, the residents of rural Oregon who have known women administrators are still more likely to disapprove than are residents of the Willamette Valley and the metropolitan area who have not known women administrators.

Summary and Discussion

The statements by the administrators who talked with Pat Schmuck and were quoted at the beginning of this paper have not been supported by the results of this study. The vast majority of this sample of adults in Oregon approve of women being school administrators. The younger and higher status respondents are more likely to be supportive as are the respondents who have children in school or have known a woman administrator. Home owners are slightly less supportive, although a majority of them still favor women in administration. There are no differences in the support of people with different political affiliations or likelihood to vote. The respondents are more likely to approve of women being elementary principals than their being secondary principals or school superintendents.

Generalizing from These Results

To what extent may these results generalize to other states? Obviously, we can give no certain answer to this question, but we can speculate. The

degree of sex segregation in school administration in Oregon is similar to that in other states, if not more severe. In Oregon, 94% of the principals, and 99.8% of the superintendents are male (Schmuck, 1976:20). Nationally, 86% of the principals and 99.9% of the superintendents are male (Fishel and Pottker, 1974:6). Furthermore, while Oregon has often led the way in legislation relating to environmental issues, Oregon voters also have been traditionally conservative in political issues. Oregon voters chose the more conservative Republican candidate in all the presidential elections from 1948 through 1976, except for the 1964 contest when Lyndon Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater.

Thus, we have few reasons to believe that these results in Oregon are an anomaly. We suggest instead that school officials, members of school boards, and school administrators have overestimated the amount of public resistence to women assuming school administration posts and that the public in both Oregon and other states is indeed ready to approve women entering school administration.

Equity and Excellence in Administration

Encouraging women to become school administrators can benefit not only professional women educators, but also schools and the children attending them. The available research indicates that women administrators do more than a satisfactory job. A number of studies have compared the performance of male and female school administrators. Fishel and Pottker (1975:113) summarized the results:

> "These behavioral studies clearly indicate that in terms of ability to supervise and administer a school and to maintain good relations with students and parents, the few women who have been able to obtain *administrative positions have per*formed as capably as, if not more capably than, their male counterparts."

Models for Children

Perhaps even more important, women administrators can be an important role model for the children in the schools that they serve. If we are to encourage children to break out of the stereotyped sex roles of the past, we must provide them with models of what the future can be. Since children spend up to one-third of their time in schools, letting them see capable women working in all areas of the educational enterprise can only have a beneficial effect on their perceptions of the future possibilities.

Table 1

Attitudes of Oregon Residents Toward Women Administrators

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Women Elementary Principal	6.3	26.1	67.6	820
Women High School Principal	15.6	25.8	58.6	819
Women School Superintendent	13.2	27.1	59.7	817

Table 2

Attitudes of Men and Women Toward Women Administrators

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principal:				
Males	4.2	29.2	66.6	404
Females	8.4	23.1	68.5	416
chi-square = 8.78, df=2, p = .01*				
High School Principal				
Males	11.7	28.9	59.5	402
Females	19.4	22.8	57.8	417
chi-square = 10.86, df=2, p=.004				
School Superintendent				
Males	10.9	28.8	60.3	403
Females	15.5	25.4	59.2	414
chi-square = 4.11, df=2, p=.13				

*The chi-square (χ^2) values given in this and subsequent tables are statistics derived to test the probability that the results occurred by chance. In general, the higher the chi-square value the less likely the results are to occur by chance. The degrees of freedom (df) listed are a function of the size of the table. The degrees of freedom are used in determining the probability (p) that the results occur by chance.

For the first set of results in this table, the chi-square value of 8.78 with 2 degrees of freedom means that the probability of getting the distribution of responses among the males and females simply by chance (p) is equal to only one time out of one hundred.

Table 3

Attitudes Toward Women Administrators by Age of Respondent

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principals				
Age:				
18-29 yrs	2.1	26.1	71.8	234
30-44 yrs	6.3	26.9	66.8	208
45-59 yrs	8.2	26.1	65.8	184
60 & over	9.8	25.3	64.9	194
chi-square = 12.15, df=6, p=.06				
High School Principals				
Age:				
18-29 yrs	8.6	28.0	63.4	232
30-44 yrs	13.5	24.5	62.0	208
45-59 yrs	19.0	23.4	57.6	184
60 & over	23.1	26.7	50.3	195
chi-square = 20.90, df=6, p =.002				
School Superintendent				
Age:				
18-29 yrs	6.0	29.1	65.0	234
30-44 yrs	12.1	35.1	62.8	207
45-59 yrs	15.8	26.8	57.4	183
60 & over	20.7	26.9	52.3	193
chi-square = 22.63, df=6, p=.0009				

Table 4

Attitudes Toward Women Administrators by Home Ownership

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principal				
Home Ownership:				
Own home	8.1	23.8	68.1	546
Rent home	2.9	30.7	66.4	274
chi-square = 10.95, df=2, p=.004				
High School principal				
Own home	18.9	22.9	58.2	546
Rent home	9.2	31.5	59.3	273
chi-square = 16.24, df=2, p=.0003				
School Superintendent				
Own home	15.1	25.6	59.4	544
Rent home	9.5	30.0	60.4	273
chi-square = 5.62, df=2, p=.06				

Table 5

Attitudes Toward Women Administrators by Parent Status

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principal				
Children in public schools:				
Have children in school	5.2	24.4	70.3	266
No children in school	6.9	26.9	66.2	554
chi-square = 1.58, df=2, p=.45				
High School Principal				
Children in public schools:				
Have children in schools	10.6	25.3	64.2	265
No children in schools	18.1	26.0	56.0	554
chi-square = 8.51, df=2, p=.01				
School Superintendent				
Children in public schools:				
Have children in schools	10.6	23.8	65.7	265
No children in schools	14.5	28.6	56.9	552
chi-square = 5.95, df = 2, p = .05				

Table 6

Attitudes Towards Women Administrators by Region of Residence

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principal				
Region:				
Tri-county, metro	5.4	27.2	67.4	389
Willamette Valley	5.0	16.3	78.7	221
Coastal	15.2	12.1	72.7	33
Eastern	6.8	37.5	55.7	88
Southern	10.1	39.3	50.6	89
chi-square = 38.30, df=8, $p < .001$				
High School Principal				
Region:				
Tri-county, metro	13.1	28.3	58.6	389
Willamette Valley	15.0	18.2	66.8	220
Coastal	15.2	15.2	69.7	33
Eastern	17.0	30.7	52.3	88
Southern	27.0	32.6	40.4	89
chi-square = 27.64, df=8, p=.0005				
School Superintendent				
Region:				
Tri-county, metro	9.8	30.5	59.7	387
Willamette Valley	11.8	20.0	68.2	220
Coastal	15.2	12.1	72.7	33
Eastern	15.9	29.5	54.5	88
Southern	28.1	32.6	39.3	89
chi-square = 39.0, df = 8, $p < .0001$				

Table 7

Attitudes Toward Women Administrators by Knowing a Woman Administrator

	Disapprove (-5 to -1) %	Approve (+1 to +4) %	Strongly Approve (+5) %	(n)
Elementary Principal				
Have known woman administrator:				
Yes	6.1	18.7	75.2	246
No	6.5	29.4	64.1	571
chi-square = 10.73, df=2, p=.005				
High School Principal				
Have known woman administrator:				
Yes	11.8	22.4	65.7	245
No	17.3	27.3	55.3	571
chi-square = 8.04, df=2, p=.018				
School Superintendent				
Have known woman administrator:				
Yes	13.5	20.4	66.1	245
No	13.2	30.1	56.8	569
chi-square = 8.39, df=2, p=.015				

Table 8

Attitudes Toward Women Administrators by Region

Controlling for Contact with Women Administrators

Attitudes Toward Women Elementary Principals

Region	Have Had Contact With Women Administrators				No Contact With Women Administrators			
	Dis-Approve	Approve	Strongly Approve	(n)	Dis-Approve	Approve	Strongly Approve	(n)
Willamette Valley	4.1	6.8	89.2	74	5.5	21.2	73.3	146
Metro	6.8	22.0	71.2	118	4.8	29.5	65.7	271
Rural	7.4	27.8	64.8	54	10.4	37.0	52.6	154
TOTAL	6.1	18.7	75.2	246	6.5	29.4	64.1	571
chi-square=12.43,df=4,p=.01					chi-square=16.59,df=4,p=.0023			

Attitudes Toward Women High School Principals

Willamette Valley	12.2	13.5	74.3	74	16.6	20.7	62.8	145
Metro	9.4	26.5	64.1	117	14.7	29.0	56.3	272
Rural	16.7	25.9	57.4	54	22.7	30.5	46.8	154
TOTAL	11.8	22.4	65.7	245	17.3	27.3	55.3	571
chi-square=6.88,df=4,p=.14					chi-square=10.46,df=4,p=.0334			

Attitudes Toward Women as Superintendents

Willamette Valley	13.5	12.2	74.3	74	11.0	24.1	64.8	145
Metro	8.5	23.9	67.5	117	10.4	33.3	56.3	270
Rural	24.1	24.1	51.9	54	20.1	29.9	50.0	154
TOTAL	13.5	20.4	66.1	245	13.2	30.1	56.8	569
chi-square=12.60,df=4, p=.0134					chi-square=13.34, df=4, p=.0097			

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